

Confessions of a Green Beret

William Pfaff

I JOINED Army Special Forces in 1956, when that was still an innocent act. It was a Reserve Detachment, although nearly all of us had seen active duty in the Second World War or the Korean War. I was a romantic and a fantasist; so were most of the others. Our fantasies were individual but the fact that we chose to act them out with uniforms, weapons, and a dream of military adventure, provided our quality in common.

A good friend of mine now dead, an old priest who had served four years on the German Western front in the First World War and later was expelled from Nazi Germany for his political activities, suggested dryly to me when I described Special Forces that it sounded fascist. I was astounded, but I was also upset because I was able to make myself understand why he said this. The epithet now has been applied to Special Forces again. The Nhatrang killing, followed by disclosure of the alleged massacre of civilians by members of the Americal Division at Songmy—the American Oradour—invites comparison of the American Army, and its elite troops, with those of Nazi Germany.

The Songmy case, like Oradour, seems to have been a matter of calculated (or half-calculated) reprisal, exemplary terrorism, against the inhabitants of a sullenly hostile district. Such crimes against civilians are well within the oldest and bleakest practice of warfare, and require no totalitarian indoctrination, only carelessness or connivance by higher commands and a brutalized habit of mind among officers and troops—in this case reinforced by the casual brutality of American policy with respect to bombing and artillery fire. Songmy was within a “free-fire zone” where every Vietnamese, by our proclamation, is enemy.

The significance of the “Green Beret Murder Case”—and nearly everyone has grasped that it was significant, an exemplary event in the course of American public morality—lies in the fact that the alleged murder was so doggedly without passion or the justifications of panic or crisis. It is

its *administrative* quality which so dazzles us: its reflection of an apparent assumption by those involved that murder is the appropriate way to dispose of a prisoner who presents an obstacle to the orderly conduct of an intelligence operation. As one of the Special Forces officers accused of the crime wrote to his wife, in a letter made available to the press, “There were numerous reasons why we couldn’t let him go, so the powers decided to do away with him. Being the people involved, it was up to us to come up with a plan and execute it. We followed through with it thinking that the proper coordination had been made and that this was a military operation.”

It is this belief that a failure of coordination constitutes what was wrong at Nhatrang, together with the state of mind suggested in the much-quoted euphemism, “to terminate with extreme prejudice,” attributed to American intelligence officials (and denied by them), which lends to the affair a totalitarian atmosphere. Such a clerkly impersonality about killing a prisoner has found a comparison in the administrative routine of the death camps, whose SS commanders would complain to one another about the bureaucratic difficulties of their task and compare notes on the technical and organizational solutions they had found most satisfactory.

The nation—to judge from most of the published comment on the affair and the reactions in Congress—seems unwilling to concede this accusation. In its anger at the scandal of the Nhatrang affair’s having been publicized, the American public seems to avow that we have done far worse things than murder in Vietnam: why strain at the fate of Thai Khac Chuyen when we have feasted on devastation—at Songmy but, more impersonally, at an abundance of other hamlets since this gruesome war began. But our larger horrors have usually been the impersonal manufacture of death by technology. The killing of this one man was distinguished by the fact that individual men acted with their own hands after giving thought to his fate, and to the problem his survival presented to them. We need to ask about these men, these Special Forces soldiers, and about the national morality which caused this act to come about.

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Let me first tell you about Special Forces when I knew it. Any man who joins an elite military unit is allying himself to a myth, trying to appropriate it. He is also imposing a formal discipline upon himself which implies an inner indiscipline, an unacknowledged insecurity. We civilians who belonged to the Reserve Detachments of the force were compromising with such motivations. We were all restless men, for some a matter of tiresome jobs or fading marriages. For others the wars we had experienced had provided a climax of experience, affording a straightforward test which gave a meaning—distorted but easily comprehended—to lives otherwise choked with banality or frustrations. One such man had been with the Rangers who scaled the Pointe du Hoc cliffs in Normandy in 1944. Another had been with an OSS detachment in wartime Prague. Now they were invoking these pasts, in a dilapidated metropolitan armory and in the hard, sweet weekends we spent on skis or in the Adirondack forests. On those exercises, and in our summer weeks at Fort Bragg and in the Camp McCall Carolina swamplands, we abandoned the conventional military impedimenta, sleeping in ponchos on the ground, carrying little except weapons and radios, living comfortably with the marsh animals, living off the country, using the birdsongs to tell us of others moving about in the district. There was a fresh pleasure in this kind of living with the land, as well as the more familiar reassurance that is found in oversimplifying life, creating a manageable adventure. A British officer who wrote a good book about the desert war, Vladimir Peniakoff (he was Russo-Belgian in origin), said that “only to the fools amongst the men of my generation will the realization come as a surprise that we liked war.” Most of the men in my 303 Special Forces Detachment were, no doubt naively, acting out of Peniakoff’s generalization.

There were a few, or perhaps not a few, who had disordered motives they were not able to acknowledge. The military role is sexually charged, most of all that of an elite force, and it is possible to assert a formal potency which reality contradicts or torments. I was friendly with a young salesman and Marine veteran who married while he was serving with our unit. He called me the weekend after to borrow my car while he and his bride moved to a new apartment. I found him amid boxes and furniture wearing full uniform, complete to the then-outlawed green beret, preternaturally bright, disturbed, oblivious to his scared girl, and of course the week after he deserted her and fled from New York. But what I am describing is no more than ordinary human confusion as it assumes military expression, and none of this necessarily meant that we were the kind of men who would bundle double-agents into bags, drug and chain them to weights, murder them, and dump their bodies into the China Sea.

THE PEOPLE in the regular Special Forces at Fort Bragg (where we trained) and in Germany were more impressive—and more dangerous. I should say that nearly all were internal emigrés from the Army. The American military services are notoriously complacent and unimaginative in peacetime, becoming effective only when they have digested huge intakes of civilians—talented lawyers and artisans and businessmen—and after these have had time to learn the military system and take over staffs and the middle levels of command. At the same time, in a prolonged war this forces the services to discard their incompetents and promote talent: and thus in the Civil War and the Second World War the American Army was formidable and innovative. (In Vietnam nothing of the kind has happened. This war has been fought by the professional officer corps.) The peacetime Army is stolidly hostile to elite formations, and the regular officers who joined Special Forces in the 1950’s were for all practical purposes abandoning the conventional career structure. They accepted that they would retire as majors or colonels. Thus Special Forces was led by eccentrics and enthusiasts, with more than its share both of brains and neuroses.

The regular non-commissioned officers typically were mature men of that exceptional class which armies traditionally salvage: intelligent and gifted, with little formal education as civilians. They gravitated toward Special Forces where NCO’s had the greatest independence and responsibility and only nominal distinctions were drawn among ranks. The airborne divisions ordinarily collect the Army’s wild men, the straightforward brawlers and bar-wreckers. Special Forces were a sober and fairly reserved group, with unexpected talents and personalities, intellectual in their violence. I particularly remember one senior sergeant with whom I worked, who had never finished high school but spoke German and Czech and was better informed on current Czechoslovak political developments than I—and East European political affairs were at that time my civilian profession. He had been a member of an operational team destined, if war broke out, for Czechoslovakia.

In those days Special Forces expected that they would be sent to liberate Europe. The cold war was still severe; the Hungarian revolution and the Polish events of 1956 were just past; John Foster Dulles was Secretary of State. A general war in Europe was not at all unimaginable, and if it had come the 10th Special Forces Group in Germany would have been launched into Eastern Europe to create and sustain a partisan movement. They would have gone in by light plane or high-altitude parachute drops in individual teams of two officers and eleven sergeants and corporals. They would then have been expected to provide instruction, staff and medical support,

and communications to partisan formations of the kind we had known during the Second World War. They would not have expected to come home again for a very long time. Except for a detachment in the Far East, the Army's only other Special Forces formation was the 77th Group at Fort Bragg, the training and headquarters organization. We in the Reserve would, in war, have provided the first element of expansion and replacement. But a good many of the regular officers were skeptical of how much of an expansion the organization could bear. There already was a problem keeping out the adventurers, the mad, and the cracked, and they had a fairly clear idea of what we in the Reserves were like.

But in the regular force they were a little mad too. They were making a profession of guerrilla warfare, and many had practiced it in the 1940's, in the Resistance itself or in the OSS. They could not afford the Reservists' self-indulgent variety of fantasies, but they had a perverse romanticism of their own or they would not have been in the force. Theirs was not the regular soldier's serenity—on Armistice Day, 1918, "Thank God we can now get back to real soldiering." There was a tension to Special Forces which, unlike that of the Regular Army, was emotional as well as physical. They made up without much doubt the most intellectual body of men the American Army has ever collected in a force intended for combat in the field. But theirs was an un-American intellectuality, pessimistic and rather cynical, and this was not wholly a result of the number of Europeans in the force. As I look back at Fort Bragg, it seems to me that both regular and reserve elements of Special Forces must be described as being composed of self-consciously uprooted men, emotionally and intellectually detached from the mainstream of civilian society but also from that securely bland and sentimental Southern institution, the American Army itself.

Were we in Special Forces in the 1950's—in our Kearny, New Jersey armory and at Fort Bragg and in Germany—terrorists *in potentia*? I would then have denied it; yet I understood even then that we were in search of a formalized role of violence, moved by unadmitted private motives, seeking an emotionally redemptive structure of *action*. We simply asked to be used. This force, in personality and talent, was an explosive waiting to be detonated.

Our rebellion against the routine Army and the tedium of civilian existence, against the unbearable or inadmissible realities of personality, had already set us off from conventions, even from limits. We were moral rebels waiting to be loosed. We needed to be controlled by the banal men and the tiresome bureaucracies we resisted. But instead we were launched into cold-war enterprises and into a Vietnamese war which by their nature obscured moral coordinates. This "liber-

ating" force of men was put to work in the most corrupting of all military roles, counterrevolution.

THERE IS a sound governmental instinct which in the past has made "special forces"—unconventional or politically-motivated military organizations—the provisional expedients of wartime, quickly disbanded in peace. The British wound up Special Operations Executive—upon which our Special Forces had some claim of parentage—when peace broke out, and we did the same with the OSS. In a world war the clandestine and political elements of the fighting forces are largely civilian in origin and have a dominating mission which contains and directs their energies. In peacetime these forces retain the men who are unassimilable by civilian life. They then are held together not by an overriding public purpose but by what remains, the entrancements of action, the myths and fulfillments of adventure. In peacetime they become dominated by *means*; the wartime goal has vanished; or any goal may serve. Theirs is not the safe complacency of regular Army or Navy: they have repudiated that by enlisting in the special force. Theirs is closer to the Nietzschean sentiment, action binding them to an existence otherwise without coherence, moved by inner compulsions rather than external and politically articulate purposes.

When such men do turn to politics, it may be to an exclusive vision, the elite vision to impose upon the intolerably shapeless reality of society. Thus the French *paras* who survived Dien-bienphu, in anguish at a reactionary and morally supine French policy in Algeria, undertook what they regarded as a revolutionary mission to the Algerians. By waging *guerre révolutionnaire* they would create a society which transcended both the old colonialism—which they despised—and the new *fellahin* nationalism, which they respected while rejecting. They would create a post-political fraternity of revolutionaries, Frenchmen who had made themselves into "Asians" and Algerians willing to accept a fraternity of the brave. It ended for them, of course, in torturing and in mutiny, an *Organisation Armée Secrète*. They afterward sang Edith Piaf's "*Je ne regrette rien*," but it had been squalor, a sanguinary collapse of hubris. Yet their moral example was an exemplary one, had we paid attention.

The men of Special Forces had never, until the end of the 1950's, regarded themselves as "political." During the three years I was with the force we saw ourselves as an instrument of the nation, rather less blunt than most, but with no peculiar mission to Western civilization. Despite our special qualities we were very American—Americans of our day—in our ignorance of scruples, of the possibilities of political complexity and contradiction. We took our role, like the risks, for granted.

When it was first organized in 1952 Special Forces was quite without a political dimension. It was a very small "stay-behind" force for Europe, created at a time when the threat of Russian attack seemed grave. The model was the British Special Air Service Regiment, and the unit's mission was to allow itself to be overrun by the Russian armies and then to maraud their headquarters and behind-the-lines installations. (This remained a specialty, and one reason some senior officers bore a grudge against Special Forces was that the great "Flashburn" maneuvers of 1954 in the Southern United States—the largest held since the Second World War—had to be halted and restarted twice because Special Forces kept ingeniously and provocatively "killing" or kidnapping the major commanders and staffs of the other side before the exercise could be got properly underway.)

Later, and in part as a result of the intra-Army struggle over the fate of the unit, the wartime mission was expanded to include developing a long-term guerrilla operation in the Russian rear—the Hungarian and Polish crises had made this a preoccupation of the Army by the time I was a member.

It is important to understand that so far as there was a political rationale—and mystique—to Special Forces in this period, it derived from the popular resistance experiences of wartime Europe and the Far East. A good many of the European-born members of the force were veterans of the Resistance and others had been with the OSS military detachments which had supported the French and Italian partisan movements and the Kachin and Karen guerrillas in Burma. The organizational parentage of Special Forces lay—with a lapse or two—with the military operations branch of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, and they in turn had learned their trade from the British Special Operations Executive.

YET THE military identity of Special Forces was rigidly maintained in those years. We were soldiers, never "agents." We were a uniformed force under military command and we claimed the rights of soldiers under the Geneva and Hague Conventions governing military operations and prisoners of war, although no one wanted to have an occasion to test those claims. I realize now that this point, insistently made while I was at Fort Bragg, revealed a struggle going on at the higher levels of government. The CIA included para-military people who—as the Kim Philby controversy has since brought to light—had joined with the British Secret Intelligence Service in the late 1940's to sponsor a guerrilla uprising in Albania (betrayed by Philby, who was managing the British side) and which organized the Guatemalan coup of 1954. In the late Eisenhower years there apparently were pressures, no doubt budgetary, on the CIA which

caused the agency to press the Army to allow it to make use of Special Forces in para-military operations. Or so I surmise from what later happened, when under the Kennedy administration Special Forces were much employed by the CIA or, as some reports have it, placed under CIA control. Any Army, to say nothing of the American Army, dislikes this kind of situation as organizationally corrupting and politically compromising, and in the Nhatrang episode an obvious and powerful factor in the arrest and charge of the Special Forces men was Regular Army fury at the uses made of men nominally under their command. (While most Special Forces units were returned to Army command after President Kennedy's death, one of the detachments in Vietnam supposedly remains under CIA control, while Special Forces itself has undertaken some operations outside South Vietnam's borders which supplement CIA activities. Most or all of the Nhatrang accused belonged to this latter group. An additional complication in that situation is that some of the accused, while they were assigned to Special Forces and wore the green beret, were actually Army intelligence officers temporarily attached to the force. It has not been made clear whether their chain of command was wholly military or whether they had a command link to the CIA.)

But in the 1950's our training dealt with guerrilla tactics and operations, and with intelligence matters and security mainly as they served military operations. It spoke of Lawrence and Mad Anthony Wayne, of Botha's Boer commandos and Wingate, of the Long Range Desert Group, Special Air Service, Tito, and the French FFI. It was, I fear, John Kennedy, acting under the pressure of Vietnam, who turned Special Forces around at the beginning of the 1960's, causing it to add to its training curriculum the study of another kind of problem: that faced by the security formations which in the 1940's had attempted to *suppress* Tito, the FFI, and the Kachin Rangers. President Kennedy gave us back the green berets which the Army, in its hostility toward elite troops, had earlier banned. But interestingly enough, the force did not put up the old original badge of Special Forces. That had been a silver Trojan Horse. Something with less ambiguous implications was substituted.

President Kennedy was entranced by the quality and zest of Special Forces. Its romanticism and its intensity appealed to those same qualities within him. Its sheer skill as a combat force and the distinctive intelligence of its officers and men made him believe that it could provide part of the answer to a problem which he had come to see as a fundamental challenge to his administration's foreign policy—for in his own romanticism and idealism he had come to take very seriously Communist doctrines of popular liberation and peoples' wars in Asia and Latin America. Mr.

Khrushchev, balked of more conventional Soviet political successes, was arguing to the world that the popular liberation movement, supported by the Soviet Union, would outflank Western imperialism. China was to take up the same theme in Marshal Lin Piao's doctrine of Asian "rural" warfare against the "cities" of industrial and imperialist society—even though he included the Soviet Union among the latter category of enemies. To the Kennedy administration it seemed necessary to launch a new counterattack, a liberal version of "revolutionary development" fueled by Western economic and technical aid, able to bring about that economic "take-off" which had been described in the writings of the President's adviser, Walt W. Rostow. Special Forces, then, was seen as the military shield to interpose between Communist revolutionary agents and, on our side, the forces of progressive and politically liberal development.

That this was a dreadfully—fatally—misconceived analysis of Asian political realities is an argument easier to accept in this fifth year of war in Vietnam than it was in the noontime optimism of the New Frontier. But never mind; this is not an occasion for foreign-policy controversy. These, in abbreviated outline, were the assumptions which underlay the commitment of Special Forces to Vietnam in 1961, and its use elsewhere by the CIA in para-military operations against Communist or Jacobin movements in the Third World.

THE FATE of this military unit is merely an incident—a road accident—in the course of what has happened to America in Vietnam. But it must be insisted that Special Forces, like, later, the Army itself, was put to work without an intellectually and politically rigorous definition of what could be expected in Vietnam or of the restraints appropriate to clandestine action and politicized warfare. They were made the victims—complaisant victims—of an American political optimism and moral absolutism which, under stress, was to harden into something else. Our tactics of "nation-building" proved incompetent to change anything fundamental in Vietnamese hamlets which had experienced twenty or more years of politicized violence. The naive economic determinism which sustained our belief that economic development programs would bring about a political transformation of that society became wrecked on the terrorism of the Vietcong and the parochial struggles and casual brutalities of our own allies in the war. The guerrilla battalions created by Special Forces from the tribal *montagnards* and national minorities—Nungs and Cambodians—of Vietnam proved competent mercenaries, but only that: they could have no connection with any political revitalization of Vietnamese society itself. (When the *montagnards* did assert a political

consciousness they rebelled against the Saigon government. The involvement of Special Forces men in the FULRO—"United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Minorities"—rebellions at Ban Me Thuot in 1964 and 1965 supply a plaintive broken note of continuity with the old Special Forces, the old mission of the 1950's.)

The war hardened American policy into a program of expediencies and a doctrine of necessary "counter-terror" justified by our absolutist conception of war itself. Forty years ago Henry L. Stimson had said of the State and War Departments' peacetime code-breakers that gentlemen do not read another's mail, and he withdrew funds from the office, expressing a delicacy of conscience lunar in its remoteness from us. But Stimson's scruples were in his time peculiarly American, and held in defiance of the contemporary rise in Europe of ideological politics, espionage, and subversion: it was the era of Stalinism and state-induced famine in Russia, of Mussolini's mobilization of Italy, *Kristallnacht* in Germany, the Comintern, and the Spanish Civil War. America, in such a time, was the Puritan abstainer.

Now it seems that we have become the Puritan enthusiasts. Forced to practice an ideologized politics, to wage counterrevolutionary war, to suppress an underground revolutionary movement, and impose "security" upon a violently divided foreign population, we have come to display a Cromwellian determination to master every nuance of the kind of war we once abhorred. When the Nhatrang case first became known the CIA authorized a statement to the press which said that no American intelligence operative has the authority to take a life except in his own defense. The CIA, in its origins an Ivy League and establishmentarian organization, thereby revealed its own sensitivity to the kind of scruples Mr. Stimson had expressed. It obviously believed that the American popular reaction to the case would be to condemn such a murder. The CIA's assessment of its own country's mood was, of course, proved defective: and the public reaction was rather to defend the accused men and express indignation at the fact that charges had been brought. Arthur Goldberg, the former Supreme Court Justice, has published in *Life* a distinguished comment on the "appalling, indeed frightening, deterioration in our national standards of morality and law" which was revealed in the way public and Congress responded, "the powerful political clamor against prosecution which preceded the dropping of charges" against the eight accused soldiers.

It was apparent that a great many Americans found the threat of prosecution incomprehensible. Their belief, if I can attempt to formulate what was implied in the things they were saying, appears to be this: killing is the nature of war; there is no reasonable distinction to be made be-

tween the "murder" of an enemy and killing him in battle; this is so because war itself is wholly immoral, and to attempt to discriminate among the various acts of violence committed in a war is absurd. Moreover, "murders" carried out in the course of intelligence operations are part of that famous "dirty business" which the intelligence services anonymously and stoically perform on behalf of us all—or so the popular literature of espionage, and notably the books of President Kennedy's favorite, Ian Fleming, has led us to assume.

Now what is most striking in all of this is that it expresses Mr. Stimson's moral absolutism, but turned around. Isn't all war murder? Mr. Stimson therefore wanted all war abolished and the rule of international law established. So do we today. But denied that solution, we turn instead to an alternate totalism: compelled to fight, we will admit no principle of restraint on how we fight. (The identical absolutism is apparent among many of those Americans who oppose the Vietnam war. Retrospective reinterpretations of the cold war—of the Korean war and Stalinism and the Czechoslovak coup of 1948—and even of the Second World War, are carried out in the belief that past American policies and past American wars must of necessity be condemned in order to validate a condemnation of American policy toward Vietnam.) At the same time, both supporters and critics of the Vietnam war regard acts of terror there, or expedient killings such as the one at Nhatrang, as morally indistinguishable from the practice of war itself. While we react to massacre, our absolutism is implicated here too. If civilians in a "free-fire zone" are made fair game for the B-52's, why not for the infantryman's machine gun? As some of the participants at Songmy have said, they had lost friends, the village was notoriously booby-trapped, the bastards all would kill you if you give them a chance—and war is hell.

"I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die," sings Johnny Cash in his "Folsom Prison Blues." D. H. Lawrence wrote of Americans that "All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." But in recent years this bleak and rural hardness in America has been muffled, denied; as a nation we have been killers, but detached, numerating the deaths as indices of political progress in Asia. A single killing by single men ought to provide moral relief from the technocratic administration of undifferentiated deaths. The French officers about whom I spoke grasped the moral engagement into which they had entered when they tortured or killed an Algerian rebel whom they professed to love as well as to hate. This they regarded as an ultimate encounter with a man who was, equally with themselves, the victim of necessity. They professed to seek "insecurity and

disquietude," deliberately making themselves outlaws to a Europe whose "decadence" they wished, by their moral self-immolation, to cure. Clearly they were within a modern tradition of romantic absolutism in politics, like Italy's intellectual fascists a generation earlier, believers in the doctrine that violence "could be revolutionary and capable of making men more human" (as their fellow Frenchman, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, wrote in support of Communist violence in 1947, and as others write today). But they were morally serious men; they acknowledged responsibility.

Never mind that these French officers acted within a general theory of revolution which was of pernicious and fantastic romanticism. They understood who it was that committed the crime, and that it was crime. It is exactly the absence of this in what was said by the men involved in the Nhatrang case, and its absence in what their supporters at home and in Congress said and wrote, which makes ours the worse case, the virginal absolutists.

The appeal to authority ("... the powers decided to do away with him. Being the people involved, it was up to us to come up with a plan. . .") was commonly offered by individual Nazis accused of war crimes; but the Nuremberg court insisted upon a principle of individual responsibility for an individual's acts. Yet a consciousness of responsibility and of crime can also be found in statements made by Nazi officers and leaders. Even the abominable Heinrich Himmler told his death-camp guards to harden themselves and suppress pity, to keep in mind the surpassing goals which justified acts which might otherwise fill them with horror. "We are original in one important point," he told his masseur, Felix Kersten, "our measures are the expression of an idea, not the search for any personal advantage or ambition. We desire only the realization on a Germanic basis of a social ideal and the unity of the West. We will clarify the situation at whatever cost." He also said, "It is the curse of greatness that it must step over dead bodies to create new life. Yet we must create new life, we must cleanse the soil or it will never bear fruit. It will be a great burden for me to bear." The presumption is diabolical. Yet it was just that they were conscious of what they were doing in the service of their ideal which makes us see the Nazis as historically unique. We do not place Nazism's genocidal acts in the same historical category with the casual slaughters of Jenghiz Khan or the straightforward communal murders of Hindus and Moslems, or the mass killings of Indonesia amok. The scale of the acts might be comparable, but they radically differ in quality.

IDEALISM and politically motivated crimes are companions. Only by idealism do you turn a sensitive man to an unconventional ruthlessness. The brutality of ordinary sol-

diering and war conforms to a structure and tradition which declare some limits. The "laws of war" and the body of international conventions governing acts of war are not a mockery of civilization but make up one of civilization's fragile accomplishments. The murder of prisoners, to say nothing of terrorist acts, is literally demoralizing to international society. The refusal to prosecute those alleged to have committed such crimes, with refuge taken in executive privilege or the secrecy of other operations, undermines legality itself, a worse blow to civilized standards than the crimes themselves.

Murder is most easily forgiven when it is personal, carried out for private motives, as the law acknowledges. When it is an act of idealism it takes on another and more sinister quality, with uncontrollable effects—as Lee Harvey Oswald and Gavrilo Princip, among others, have demonstrated. What has happened in Vietnam, as the "Green Beret Murder Case" suggests, but as certain programs of "counter-terrorism" and subversion would also demonstrate, is that we too have come to accept expedient and ideologically justified murder—except that ours is still the virginal ideology that hardly acknowledges that it exists.

I vividly remember a CIA man, a bespectacled doctor of philosophy, I once met in one of Vietnam's northern provinces. An automatic pistol under his arm, an AR15 rifle in his jeep, he ran a "revolutionary development" team which "rooted out" the Vietcong infrastructure in a village at the same time that it built schools and dug wells for the peasants. He was entirely pleased with himself; he made much of his ability—he mentioned it to me several times—to nominate men to die. He said that he had chosen a Nung rather than a Vietnamese as his bodyguard because when he pointed out a man to be killed he wanted no hesitation. He said that he was very happy in Vietnam, and no doubt he was an idealist, doing the Lord's work.

The actions of individual men are comprehensible if not always forgivable. Secret work and "special" military units attract a kind of man

whose fellowship I am the least qualified to deny. But such men and their organizations need to be controlled or we enter into a *folie à deux* with the enemy.

A government needs to do some things anonymously, to be able to act in ways that do not commit our diplomats or compromise our friends. But any secret agency, and particularly any force committed to clandestine work in a war, needs to be kept severely accountable to those officials who are themselves accountable to public and press. The men involved need unambiguous charters and unmistakable limitations on what they can do. There is at work in these matters a moral version of "Gresham's Law": the practices of the most unscrupulous nation tend to force themselves upon all the others. The espionage, subversion, and security expediencies of the totalitarian states, once understood to be a part of what set them off from us, have tended to be taken over by us as regrettable but inevitable measures of realism. Yet how can this process be arrested if we ourselves accept a moral absolutism which denies scruples about *how* you act so long as there is an idealistic justification for *why* you act—an absolutism which creates the intellectual and emotional conditions for expedient massacre as well as murder? And which is permitted to override law?

Graham Greene, writing of Vietnam, once observed that Americans are virgins. "We don't have so many in Europe. I'm glad. They do a lot of harm." Vietnam has now provided our national rape. One would wish that we had thereby learned an existential lesson about ourselves, and about politics. We can only control the things we do, our acts in this moment of time. Our good intentions, our virginal enthusiasms, are of no use to the dead. If we murder prisoners or practice terrorism in a noble cause we do not thus verify our ideals; we demonstrate that we are murderers and terrorists. The first American casualties in Vietnam, in April 1962, were Special Forces soldiers. But Special Forces has also provided moral casualties in this war, and they were not the first and will not be the last.

SOCIALISM AND THE FUTURE

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